

ISSN 2002-3898

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7146/nts.v25i1.110898>

Published with support from Nordic Board for Periodicals in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NOP-HS)

## **Gone With the Plague: Negotiating Sexual Citizenship in Crisis**

**Ken Nielsen**

### **ABSTRACT**

This article suggests that two historical performances by the Danish subcultural theatre group Buddha og Bagbordsindianerne should be understood not simply as underground, amateur cabarets, but rather that they should be theorized as creating a critical temporality, as theorized by David Román. As such, they function to complicate the past and the present in rejecting a discourse of decency and embracing a queerer, more radical sense of citizenship. In other words, conceptualizing these performances as critical temporalities allows us not only to understand two particular theatrical performances of gay male identity and AIDS in Copenhagen in the late 1980s, but also to theorize more deeply embedded tensions between queer identities, temporality, and citizenship. Furthermore, by reading these performances and other performances like them as critical temporalities we reject the willful blindness of traditional theatre histories and make a more radical theatre history possible.

### **BIOGRAPHY**

Ken Nielsen is a Postdoctoral lecturer in the Princeton Writing Program, Princeton University, where he is currently teaching classes ranging from contemporary confession culture to tragedy. He holds a PhD in theatre studies from The Graduate Center, City University of New York, with an emphasis on Gay and Lesbian Studies from the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies (CLAGS). In addition, he holds an MA in Theatre Research from the University of Copenhagen. Published works include Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, a continuum modern theatre guide, multiple articles, and book reviews. Currently, he is at work on a book project on, what he terms, "geographies of desire."

# Gone With the Plague: Negotiating Sexual Citizenship in Crisis

KEN NIELSEN

“A historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop. For this notion defines the present in which he himself is writing history. Historicism gives the ‘eternal’ image of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past. The historical materialist leaves it to others to be drained by the whore called “Once upon a time” in historicism’s bordello. He remains in control of his powers, man enough to blast open the continuum of history.”

Benjamin’s thesis no. XVI in “Theses on the Philosophy of History”<sup>1</sup>

The situation of this article on two performances by a long-gone subcultural Danish theatre group is queer. Besides the ever-valuable project of historical reclamation of previously invisible histories, what relevance can these performances of sexual citizenship during a time of crisis possibly have? I suggest that in a time in which the connection between homosexuality and national citizenship (consider Russia and its recent anti-homosexuality laws, the USA and the seemingly never-ending debate regarding gay marriage as a threat to the nation, and Denmark and debates surrounding alternative families) is increasingly tied to recurring discourses of decency, the radical resistance to a normative definition of citizenry and insistence on a radical sexual citizen-

ship offered by these men is worth revisiting. This, I believe, is the temporal moment that offers us a “unique experience with the past” to quote Benjamin. In other words, I suggest that we, as theatre historians, can use two long-gone amateur performances, *Det Scener Endianer* and *Intet Nyt Fra Pestfronten*,<sup>2</sup> to illuminate the nexus of crisis, citizenship, and theatre. Furthermore, I propose that, in this case, ideas of radical citizenship are tied to sexuality and performance and that the group’s rejection of decency as a viable option for gay liberation in the middle of the Danish AIDS crisis allows us to understand how citizenship, even in its negation, is theatrically produced.

## CRITICAL TEMPORALITIES

Og syns de AIDS er for rå, så si’r hun ta’ å forstå,  
Det nytter ikke å glemme å tro den vil gå

Pas på når de står til søs med et lokkende kys,  
Her er mangel en skude gået under,  
Men uden lir bli’r man skør, når nu drifterne klør,  
Selvom paven han siger det er sunder’.

Til hver en hellig profet, der si’r han ve’ hva’ der’r sket,  
Der si’r hun skråt op og tror kun på det hun har set<sup>3</sup>

The second AIDS performance by Buddha og Bagbordsindianerne, a gay theatre group in the sub-cultural landscape of Copenhagen, opened in the small theatre Bøssehuset on a Saturday evening in November 1987. If the group's previous production had been shocking, this production was even darker – as were the times. While the number of people who had died of AIDS-related illnesses by late 1987 was not clear, the public discourse surrounding gay men and AIDS was getting more suspicious and vicious.<sup>4</sup> Simultaneously, the gay subculture – and maybe in particular the members of Bøssernes Befrielsesfront (the Gay Liberation Front) for whom being sexually promiscuous was a natural part of a political liberation – saw its numbers decimated. Interviewed by Eva Bøggild, Wanda Liszt says: “It was in 1982 that the first vague information arrived. First as a joke: there is a new disease that only affects homosexuals, later as a rumour one knew had a grain of truth, but nobody knew what to do about it. AIDS appeared at a point in time when we had won, so to speak. Now was the time to have fun. We had removed many of the oppressive mechanisms. Gay men were visible in the world, and it was our explicit goal to make being gay visible. Now we were to enjoy the fruits of our labour. And then this disgusting disease is thrown in your face. Headlines in *Ekstra Bladet* [a Danish tabloid]: gay cancer. Stuff like that”.<sup>5</sup>

Speaking in hindsight here, removed from the critical days of the immediate reactions to AIDS, one notices the melancholy and sense of loss in Liszt's formulation of a hard-earned victory turned into something else. Recent queer scholarship has become increasingly interested in the question of temporality – the connection between time and history. Elizabeth Freeman, for example, in her work *Time Binds* suggests that “the dialectic between time and history has been characteristic of not only Euro-American modernity but also of queer theory, or at least one particular caricature of queer theory”.<sup>6</sup> This caricature, then, Freeman contends “has not always attended to the vagaries of temporality, as practiced and as embodied, that make new conceptions of the historical possible”.<sup>7</sup> Wanting to pay attention to such ‘vagaries,’ Freeman encourages us to strive to make histories possible, or, maybe rather, to imagine history differently. If we are to follow

Freeman's work, in making the historical possible, it is necessary to pay attention “to gaps and losses that are both structural and visceral: the all-too-real limits presented by the stigmatization of AIDS, by violence against lesbians and gays, by the unbearable heaviness of the gender binary”.<sup>8</sup> In doing so, we may just be able to outline a queerer sense of history. In revisiting these performances, then, from a different place in time and geography – situated in a similar debate climate marked by fear and discrimination, but from a different temporal and geographical position – I suggest that we may better understand not only the vagaries of temporality itself, but also the queer relationship between citizenship and theatrical practices during a time of crisis.

I suggest that we look at these two performances as simultaneously in and out of time: they are historical in that they disappeared as all performance does, yet contemporary in the way in which their negotiations of radical sexuality as part of an inclusive identity remains queerly dangerous. In meaningful ways, of course, one could argue that they cannot be understood outside the context of their immediate productions as reactions to the AIDS crisis in Denmark and its consequences in terms of emotions such as loss, fear, and rage. However, I propose that they can also be understood as being out of time, that their amateurish nature and their emotional immediacy as a reaction to a body politic in crisis – literally and metaphorically – allow us to view them as queer, theatrical ghostings of ongoing debates concerning the potential of queer citizenship. The question then remains, how exactly the theatrical nature of these representations helps us understand larger issues pertaining to the crux of the relationship between theatre and democracy past and present? How can we understand the in-and-out-of-time importance of the subcultural utilization of theatre to negotiate a gay male identity in crisis?

A possible answer to this question can be found in American theatre scholar David Román's work. In *Performance in America: Contemporary U.S. Culture and the Performing Arts*, Román asks the question, “What might be gained by placing performance at the center of current national inquiries and debates?”<sup>9</sup> For Román, the performing arts play

a vital role in negotiating cultural anxieties, in particular “around ideologies of race, citizenship, and national identity”.<sup>10</sup> In order to understand how this happens; how performance, despite its ephemeral nature, can help us delineate cultural differences and their construction, Román suggests that performance “both shapes and informs” our understanding of the “contemporary”.<sup>11</sup> He goes on to explain: “I here understand the contemporary as a critical temporality that engages the past without being held captive to it and that instantiates the present without defining a future”.<sup>12</sup> The notion of an instantiated present without a defined future is where the temporality of these two performances becomes clear; it is where their potential as performances of queer notions of citizenship becomes clear in their potential to critically inform ongoing debates concerning radical citizenship.

In that regard in looking at Buddha and Bagbordsindianerne's two AIDS performances through the bifurcated lens of past and present, historical materiality and the endless vagaries of temporality, we can construct them as existing in a double bind of historical presence and informing what ultimately becomes a critical temporality. In adopting the idea of a critical temporality, then, we can also understand how the negative emotions exorcized through the performance of queer citizenship in the two performances have dual temporal functions in constructing simultaneous historical and contemporary counterpublics.<sup>13</sup> As Román writes: “These new social formations constitute a counterpublic that offers both respite and change from normative structures of being and belonging assumed both in the national culture and in the subcultural worlds that form a part of it”.<sup>14</sup>

In the following, I think of Buddha og Bagbordsindianerne's two AIDS performances as critical temporalities in their negotiation of a radical form of citizenship. The analysis relies on three key concepts that influence and overlap one another: critical temporality, queer citizenship exemplified here by the rejection of marriage as a marker of a hetero-normative citizenship, and the notion of a suspension of temporality through the ways in which the performances haunt contemporary discourse of marriage and citizenship.

## THE HISTORICAL FRONT

In order to answer these questions and potentially understand the relationship between subcultural theatrical productions, queer citizenship, and democracy, we must take Benjamin's warning in the epigraph of this paper seriously: it is necessary to understand the historical and material background for the performances, the communities at which they were aimed, and the ways in which they can be understood as critical temporalities that allow us access to a historical knowledge of a crisis, the experience of which can only be accessed through the history of the theatrical and performative reactions to it. It is in the multiple layers of transformation from a political organization concerned with personal and societal liberation of the gay man imprisoned by heterosexual masculinity to a subcultural theatre concerned with surviving and understanding the decimating plague that had beseeched it, that we may see how the experience of producing and spectating theatre allowed these men, in a time and place no longer reachable to us, to negotiate a queer form of citizenship that was ahead of its time, in a queer sort of future past.

There are two versions of the founding narrative of Bøssernes Befrielsesfront (BBF). Regardless of which narrative one believes, the organization was founded in the summer of 1971 as a reaction against the conformity of the existing homophile organization, Forbundet af 1948 (the Organization of 1948, the first gay organization in Denmark).<sup>15</sup> In its opposition to the conformist politics of the older organization, BBF understood itself as an anarchistic organization based in socialist and revolutionary politics. Its main goal was the liberation of the gay man from what it understood to be the disciplining nature of a heterosexual, capitalist society. In a fight against, what it termed “cock imperialism”, the loosely organized group of gay men, inspired by the developments in the USA and in particular the more radical members of the San Francisco and New York gay communities following the Stone Wall Riots in 1968, adopted gender fuck as a strategy: they painted their nails, wore women's clothing, and developed campy female names and personas such as Nelly Nylon, Wanda Liszt, Britta Barfoed, Dronning Surrowa, Hertha Hæmning, and Peach

Melba.<sup>16</sup> The primary point of these strategies was to create visibility for radically queer lifestyles outside a normative, heterosexual society. As Wanda Liszt, at times described as the movement's leading intellectual, says: "The point of women's clothing was that it freed us from having to say anything. When we put on women's clothing, loosened our wrists, and got on the bus, it was like putting a sign on your stomach saying: 'I'm gay'".<sup>17</sup> Lis Ladeport, another prominent member of the organization, continues: "We nourished the feminine side, watered it, and fertilized it. We experienced it as freedom. We'll claim the right to do what we want, and what we want is to put on women's clothes, because that is what you need to see – the world, all of you outside. This is not something we've arrived at through political analysis, it was a necessity. To many, suddenly throwing themselves into a world of gender fucking was like opening a gate and paradise was on the other side".<sup>18</sup>

As part of developing and furthering their strategy of a gender fucking visibility, the group developed increasingly complex performative strategies for their political work. While they toured the country in Bøssekaravanen (the Gay Caravan), performing didactic theatre in city squares all over the Danish countryside, it is with the founding of Bøssehuset (the Gay Men's House) in Christiania, Copenhagen, in 1973 that the combination of politics, queer citizenship, and theatrical expression truly blossomed. Given the nature of Christiania – essentially at the time an unincorporated village within the boundaries of Copenhagen offering a space for alternative, communal, and socialist lifestyles – it is only natural BBF found its permanent home within the community. Here BBF transforms from a directly political organization to a more loosely defined group of changing constellations of gay men engaged in various modes of performative or theatrical activities developing throughout the 1970s. However, with the 1980s, a more conservative political climate in Denmark (and globally), and a masculinization of the gay man (imagine the iconic images by Tom of Finland), BBF's gender-fucking strategies became increasingly anachronistic. As Wanda Liszt put it in 1991 in an interview with *Pan*, the leading gay magazine at the time: "when we had succeeded in

getting the same age of consent the same for both heterosexuals and homosexuals, there wasn't anything else we wanted to fight for – and marriage between gay men; we wanted no part in that [...].<sup>19</sup> In other words, the political fight for BBF was about sexual liberation in a radical way – here symbolized by the right to sleep with people of the same sex at the same age as heterosexuals – whereas the increasingly conservative forces in Forbundet af 1948 and in parliament imagined a very different route to full and worthy citizenship: marriage.

In complicated ways, then, the marriage debate and its connotations of normality and decency in Denmark in the 1980s gets tangled up with discourses about AIDS and HIV. This will become clearer in the following analysis of Buddha og Bagbordsindianerne's last AIDS performance, *Intet Nyt Fra Pestfronten*, but before delving into the specifics of the performances, let us consider for a brief moment how the two discourses – the decency and the disease discourse – function to create deep divisions between models of homosexual citizenship and how Buddha og Bagbordsindianerne's performances challenged these discourses in their conceptualization of a more radical queer citizenship.

In *The Sexual Citizen: Queer Politics and Beyond*, David Bell and John Binnie embark on a quest to reimagine the importance of a queer citizenship from the fundamental notion that all citizenship is sexual citizenship, "in that the foundational tenets of being a citizen are all infected by sexualities".<sup>20</sup> Clearly inspired by Michel Foucault's work on sexuality in *The History of Sexuality vol. 1*, as Bell and Binnie put it, very little about being a Western citizen escapes the sexual. By their very name, Buddha og Bagbordsindianerne simultaneously accept this and reject its normative and disciplining function by rejecting a cock-imperialistic sexuality grounded in a patriarchal masculinity and insisting instead on being, exactly, 'bagbordsindianere', i.e. men who have anal sex with other men. The group's amazing ability to live in a perpetual duality of acceptance and rejection can be further illuminated by Bell and Binnie's focus on citizenship as defined by space. The authors suggest that people "exercise their (sexual) citizenship rights" in multiple spaces that are not necessarily mutually exclusive: the social, the space

of the city, and the transnational.<sup>21</sup> In other words, Bøssehuset as an actual physical space allows for a different kind of negotiation of a citizenship based on belonging through not belonging, a rejection of the assimilationist agenda – in this article and in the critical temporality of the group's two performances defined by gay marriage – and thereby creating doubly marked and temporal identities. For example, when *Det Scener Endianer* opens, Fru Winther, a previously leading figure in BBF who showed clear signs of having AIDS, attended the opening. After the performance, she approached the group and said: "It was really amazing, but just imagine if somebody with AIDS had seen it".<sup>22</sup> This, I believe, perfectly illustrates how critical temporality, counterpublic, and a queer communal citizenship are negotiated through performance. Through these performances, Buddha og Bagbordsindianerne break the enormous taboos surrounding sexual identities marked by disease, but they do so through satire, farce, and the grotesque. Fru Winther's comment highlights the subversive nature of the theatrical negotiation of queer citizenship in a time of AIDS: the diseased, angry outsider being an insider in a space already outside the structures of hetero-normative experience. In other words, in Fru Winther's reaction to the show, we gain a sense of how important the BBF theatrical counterpublic, here exemplified by Buddha og Bagbordsindianerne, was to creating a sense of radical (un)belonging, a radical sense of sexual citizenship defined by a crisis of history.

#### BUDDHA OG BAGBORDSINDIANERNE

As a separate group, Buddha og Bagbordsindianerne<sup>23</sup> grew out of a number of other formations within BBF and Bøssehuset. During 1985, this group of men would produce entertainment for community gatherings in Bøssehuset every Saturday night. After four weeks, they turned elements from these performances into a show in and of itself called *Det Scener Endianer*. The group's name is indicative of the group's intentions. Wanda Liszt explains the origin of the name: "I thought it needed to be something really disgusting – fart riders, or shit pushers – something really ugly. Gay has become such a respectable word, something you can

say in Parliament, which really wasn't the point of the word. It was intended to contain some sort of danger. So, I said to Britta, it's called Buddha og Bagbordsindianerne".<sup>24</sup> In other words, the purpose of the group, as indicated by its name, is a radicalization of homosexuality, a deliberate rejection of the conformity of 'gay' in favour of a queerer sense of identity. Like the previous quote by Lis Ladeport rejecting the idea of marriage as a viable option for a new gay sense of citizenship following BBF's gender-fucking performances of the 1970s, Liszt here articulates a deliberate strategy of regaining a sense of danger. In order to do this, the group combines references to an, at that point in time, exotic religion in Denmark and anal sex. This being 1985, the moment at which AIDS necessitated public information campaigns informing the public of the danger of anal sex, deliberately naming yourself a participant in this subversive and, as broadcast on TV, deadly act is a performative act of defiance. In 1985, this campy act of defiance is indicative of the group's two AIDS performances, the first of which, *Det Scener Endianer*, opens a year before the established theatre performs the canonical American plays *As Is* and *The Normal Heart*.<sup>25</sup> Performatively claiming the homosexual, anal sex act as positive in the early, frightening days of the Danish AIDS crisis is an act that helps us understand the group's critical temporality and its function as a counterpublic, to engage Román's terms. This becomes increasingly clear as the group develops its two performances.

#### DET SCENER ENDIANER

In explaining the purpose of the first performance, Wanda Liszt says: "we wanted to create something about AIDS, religion, and the end of the world".<sup>26</sup> From the manuscript and video contained in Bent Jacobsen's private collection, it is evident that the performance became a tour de force of AIDS, religion, and the literal and metaphorical destruction of the world, as the members of BBF knew it. Using the form of the cabaret and the political revue, the group employs campy farce and the grotesque to complicate the question of gay male identity and citizenship in a time of AIDS. One grotesque scene follows the next: in a typical Cold War structure



of feeling, the world ends in nuclear annihilation; nuclear families disintegrate (symbolized in a spoof on the American TV show *Dynasty*, here called *The Survivors*); and God calls "The Alcoholic Homo-Church." The show consisted of thirty-two different scenes, sketches, songs and dances with numerous recurring elements such as "The TV-news," "The Survivors," and different spoofs on commercials used to illuminate the commodification of identity in an almost Adornian critique of the power of the electronic media to influence public opinion. In order to illuminate how the performance complicates issues of citizenship and Queer identity, two examples will suffice: that of the introduction and the sketch "The Alcoholic Homo-Church".

Everything in the performance relates to AIDS and the reactions to the disease. The introduction highlights this:

Wanda: Men ovre fra United States  
 Hertha: Der kommer pluds'li denne aids  
 Britta: Det er som denne nye pest  
 Dr.: Ku vær bestilt af doktor Best  
       For at slå ned på alle slette skikke  
 Alle: Det siger vi nu ikke  
 Dr. / Hertha:  
       For når vi mistror de normale,  
       Blir' vi Tvangsindlagt som gale  
 Wanda: Er deres tanker end banale  
 Britta: Kan deres handling give mange sår  
 Dr. Wan. Her.:  
       Og det blir' værre år for år  
 Alle: Nu ruller kapitalens luderkarle  
       De sidste våben frem og lar' dem tale.  
       Vi går alle i cølibat,  
       Både seksuelt og socialt.  
       Jeg passer mig selv og du passer dit.  
       Det er det der for tiden gir' størst profit.<sup>27</sup>

This opening number invokes a number of significant discourses: it offers a resistance to the pressures of hetero-normative oppression, it illustrates the use of the dangers of AIDS as a disciplining tool; it categorizes AIDS as a distinctly American disease, tying together AIDS and an anti-American critique of capitalism; it draws historical parallels to the Nazi regime by invoking Dr Best (the Nazi administrator

of occupied Denmark during WWII); and, finally, it levels criticism at the gay community itself by suggesting that an increasing tendency to isolation is a sign of a lack of solidarity and a desire to assimilate into a society driven solely by profit, i.e. Denmark as part of Western capitalism. Through the introduction, the group articulates itself as a counterpublic existing in multiple temporalities by drawing on a past and a present that continuously coexist. This simultaneity of temporalities and counterpublics is indicative for the performance in general. Through the performance, then, the group attempts to break the self-isolation and create a collective queer consciousness of AIDS not only as a corporeal danger for the individual gay man, but also as a danger to the recent liberation and the potential for a more radical sexual citizenship. In other words, the performance is as critical towards the homosexual community as it is towards the heterosexual society surrounding it. This can be seen in a scene about the Alcoholic Homo-Church clearly mocking the twelve-step program of self-betterment offered by, among others, Alcoholics Anonymous. This self-betterment, then, is criticized in the sketch as a return to a historically oppressive homophile identity and citizenship based on respectable behaviour.

In the scene "The Alcoholic Homo-Church," following the introductory song, a group of newly reformed gay men are gathered to listen to Pastor Dårgår preach. He praises the "good" gay men gathered in the church and asks a new member, Emil, to confess. In typical AA fashion, Emil then proceeds to tell his story, though here it happens in a song. His story mocks the typical narrative of why gay men become gay: a mother who'd rather have a girl, a childhood spent playing with dolls, a sting in a psychiatric unit, and a final conversion to "the Lord" in the Homo-Church and a return to a "normal" heterosexual identity. The penultimate verse sounds:

Sådan fandt jeg vejen hjem til Gud  
 Og jeg lyder nu hans mindste bud  
 Tænk hvis jeg var blevet radikal  
 Det er mere trygt at være normal.<sup>28</sup>

Throughout the confession and Emil's song, the psychoanalytical discourse surrounding homosexual identity is mocked and with it a pathologized gay identity that needs to be reformed rather than liberated. Here, arguably, the group rejects an allegedly productive form of gay citizenship and insists on the potential for a truly sexual form of citizenship despite the AIDS crisis. Through his engagement with the Homo-Church Emil escapes the radical movement and achieves a sense of normality. If we accept that the Homo-Church is a stand-in for the established gay movement, *Forbundet af 1948*, the sketch is a clear rejection of the organization's assimilationist politics and tactics, of which gay marriage – and its connotations of eternal, monogamous twosomeness – was the primary example. In other words, the consensus-seeking policies of the established organization is exposed as both incompatible with liberation, a gay identity informed by AIDS, and as fundamentally hypocritical. With AIDS and the increasing focus on gay men in the media and in politics, a connection between being gay and death emerged. In this way, then, the radical visibility of gender fuck changed gayness into something sinful and lethal. By reading the performance as a critical temporality, it becomes clear that it is this change in public discourse and counterpublic discourse *Buddha og Bagbordsindianerne* attempt to challenge through their performance.

#### INTET NYT FRA PESTFRONTEN

The group's next performance, *Intet Nyt fra Pestfronten* (Nothing New on the Plague Front) opened in *Bøssehuset* on 5 November 1987. As with *Det Scener Endianer*, the frame for the loosely organized series of scenes is television. In this case, the group used the charity show collecting money for AIDS patients and research, popular at the time, to organize the sketches, songs, and dances, while simultaneously mocking the governing societal reactions to AIDS.<sup>29</sup> The choice of the charity show as a frame turns out to be a stroke of genius in that it allows for an aggressively campy performance drawing on long established performance traditions in gay sub-cultural theatre productions, a sort of looking back in longing while still negotiating a new form of gay

subjectivity in a time of crisis. In other words, *Intet Nyt fra Pestfronten* can be understood as a critical temporality allowing us (and the actors and spectators at the time) to exist in and out of history simultaneously. Current oppression at the time – symbolized in the performance by the well-meaning tolerance of a heterosexual society happy to help the victimized and dying gay men—becomes tied with historical oppression negotiated through the use of camp and the charity show called “AIDS for Millions”.

The opening and closing song of the show, “*Så Længe Skuden Kan Gå*,” has been quoted earlier in the article, but two other examples will serve as the locus of analysis here. However, before turning to these examples, let us consider the general progression of scenes. The show opens with a scathing critique of the established theatre's representation of AIDS through a one-act play parodying then popular Swedish playwright Lars Norén and his plays' psychoanalytical discourse. As we saw in *Det Scener Endianer*, *Buddha og Bagbordsindianerne* reject the pathologizing nature of psychoanalytical discourse in favour of a radical acceptance of queerness as something chosen, something to be desired and lived as an identity. Even in the face of AIDS, the group insists on the productivity of ‘fisselismen’ (gender-fucking) as a personally as well as politically liberating identity. As such, the show continues by introducing the two hostesses Helle and Lykke,<sup>30</sup> clad in gold lame and magenta-coloured wigs, who welcome the viewers to AIDS for Millions! Their frantic acting and campy style is in contrast to the seriousness of their language: deepest regret, heavy hearts, fateful evening, tragic times, sad, on the verge of tears, depressed etc.<sup>31</sup> From here on out, the two hostesses appear between the different sketches and guide the progression of the performance. Recurring elements like the TV-show *Sørensens Hotel* help to establish a certain rhythm and recognisability among the shorter sketches, two of which will be mentioned here: “*Foreningen af Raske Bøsser*” and “*Sygdomsminister Ilse Ildebrand*”.<sup>32</sup>

The sketch “*Foreningen af Raske Bøsser*” (The Society for Healthy Gays) opens with a speech by Rasmus Rask.<sup>33</sup> Before members of the society's choir sing a song, Rask reads an invitation to join



the society. The speech, which reads like a personal ad, says: "Are you between fifteen and thirty, skinny and tan, not too feminine, in economical and psychological balance? Do you like travelling, art, good food and quiet nights at home? Are you tested regularly, though you practice celibacy, just because one never knows? Do you have something between your ears and between your legs and are you ready to show it in safe surroundings?"<sup>34</sup> Clearly, this is a scathing comment on the mainstream organization and a gay subculture that the members of BBF found conformist, assimilationist, and anti-sex. The use of the personal ad with its demands for a non-feminine, young man is a clear critique of a move back to the masculine cock-imperialism that BBF had struggled to overcome in the 1970s and now found itself faced with once again. Arguably, Buddha og Bagbordsindianerne here use the theatre to negotiate the negative emotions, described by Heather Love as part of queer temporality, to emphasize the ongoing need for a redefinition of a queerer citizenship despite the feelings of anger, fear, and exclusion these men felt. Furthermore, the fact that several of the actors were visibly ill (Dronning Surrowa and Hertha Hæmning were both ill at the time of performance) heightens the stakes and makes the counterpublic nature of this theatrical negotiation of citizenship even stronger.

Before the sketch with the Minister of Disease, our hostesses, Helle and Lykke, reappear and announce some new contributions: 100,000 Danish Kroner from the Young Career Doctors' Research Foundation in the hope that the collaboration will last long, and 12 Kroner from then Minister of Health, Britta Schall-Holberg in the hope that something will now finally be done for people with AIDS.

Following this, then, is a sarcastic parody of the said Minister of Health. In this version, Britta Schall-Holberg has become the 'Minister of Disease', Ilse Ildebrand. In Dronning Surrowa's parody, the Minister is a tall, masculine-looking woman in a Chanel suit who has written a poem for the poor people suffering from AIDS. The poem is clearly amateurish and meant to expose the incapability and insufficiency of the Conservative government's reaction to the crisis. The poem starts praising the

charity show for the way in which it illustrates the necessity of private initiative in a situation in which the welfare state has no money for things like this, and how supporting a cause like AIDS helps one show oneself as a good human being and citizen. But, on the other hand, she claims, it is hard to know who is to blame for AIDS, and, as such, whether the cause deserves money. As she says:

De er osse tit en gris.

For de parrer sig med tusindvis.

Og de er ligeglade hvis de slet ikke er danske.

Men islamske.

Men selv om de af deres skejen ud bliver langsomt slået ihjel.

Så er det synd. De kan ej gøre for det selv.

Så vi må alle hjælpe, De skal ej have klø.

Vi sparer sammen til en øde ø.

Der kan de se naturen og høre hundene gø

Til de skal dø.<sup>35</sup>

After which she goes on to list how the government needs to exterminate the HIV positive if they refuse to move voluntarily, because in a time of crisis being soft will not do. It is, as she says, a collective duty. She continues:

Vi må være skrap ved AIDS og HTLV3 og HIV

Og kæmpe for at alle mand

I vores gamle Danmarks Land

Igen skal blive negativ.<sup>36</sup>

Here, the group pays attention to the vagaries of temporality that Freeman encourages us to consider. Without ever making the connotation to the Nazi regime and the all-too-real persecution of gay men and lesbians during the Third Reich, the Minister's poem draws connections to this historical awareness, an almost embodied knowledge of historical suffering that the poem illuminates. As such, then, the scene clearly comments on a both contemporary and historical debate. The queer citizenship the group imagines in this scene is one informed by victimization and suffering; however, by exposing the executioner and not the victim (the Minister of Disease, not the gay man), the group reaffirms

its historically grounded resistance to anything less than the full right to a queer and radical model of citizenship even in a time of crisis. In other words, the Minister's desire that all Danes will again be negative is juxtaposed with the positive model of queer and radical citizenship. In this way, *Intet Nyt Fra Pestfronten* becomes a critical temporality, an example of its own historical present, reaching back in history and into the future for a more radical way of being.

## CONCLUSION

And, so, we are back where we started: at the present moment of which the historical materialist cannot do without, according to Benjamin. I began this article quoting Benjamin and the necessity of a present that is more than a transition for a historical materialist. These two performances have become such presents – critical temporalities fixed in time, yet fluid in their transformative and performative consequences for potentially queer citizenships.

In understanding these performances as not simply underground, amateur cabarets (though they were also exactly that), I propose that they may be theorized as creating a critical temporality, as theorized by David Román, and, as such, function to connect the past and the present, the local with the global. In other words, conceptualizing BBE, and in particular Buddha og Bagbordsindianerne, as queer critical temporalities allows us not only to understand two particular theatrical performances of gay male identity and AIDS in Copenhagen in the late 1980s, but also to theorize more deeply embedded tensions between queer identities, temporality and citizenship. By reading these performances and other performances like them, wilfully forgotten by mainstream theatre histories, we take seriously the charge to make other histories possible. And, in letting such historical critical temporalities inform the one in which we are now writing history and the future past in which we presently live we may avoid Benjamin's bordello of historicism. At least, I hope that is the case.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 I express my gratitude to my writing group for their feedback. Thanks also go to Magnus Tensing Schneider, editor-in-chief of *Nordic Theatre Studies*, for his kind assistance and to the anonymous reader whose feedback was both generous and productive. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn, Schocken Books, New York 1968, p. 254. Though I engage Benjamin's philosophy of historical materialism herein, I do not condone the sexist nature of the image of the male historian blasting open the continuum of history.
- 2 Throughout this article, I maintain the Danish titles of groups, names, and performances. These are quite campy in Danish and reinventing the titles in English seems counterproductive. I will present literal translations throughout. *Det Scener Endianer* is a phonetic, nonsensical play on the sentence "Det er senere end De aner", which translates to "It's later than you think." *Intet Nyt fra Pestfronten* is a campy play on Erich Maria Remarque's war novel, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, in Danish *Intet Nyt fra Vestfronten*, here turned into *Nothing New on the Plague Front*. The group's name is explained in detail below.
- 3 *Intet nyt fra Pestfronten*, "Så længe skuden kan gå." The manuscript, like the script of *Det Scener Endianer*, is in Bent Jacobsen's (Britta Barfoed) private collection. A literal translation would go: "And if you think that AIDS is too tough, she says try to understand / it's no use thinking it'll all work out. // Be careful when you set sail with a tempting kiss / here, many a barge has gone down. / But without sex you'll go crazy / even if the Pope says it's healthier. // To every holy prophet, who says he knows what has happened / she says fuck you and believes only what she has seen. / As long as the barge can sail, she'll take care of herself / and still make all her own decisions."
- 4 Between 1980 and 2011 2.878 people were diagnosed with AIDS in Denmark. Of these, 2.058 were dead by December 2011. In 1993 the highest number of diagnosed patients was recorded: 239. Denmark did not start registering HIV patients until August 1990. Between 1990 and 2011, 6.152 people have been diagnosed as HIV positive. Danmarks Statistik, *Statistisk Årbog 2012*, p. 140.
- 5 Eva Bøggild, "Tissemand, Tissemand – Whauw, Whauw, Whauw" in *Flot, Fræk og Forførende: 18 uundværlige historier fra pressens mest banebrydende magasin*, eds. Flemming Andersen, Eva Bøggild and Erik Valeur, Haase, Copenhagen 1994, p. 160. Original quote: "Det var i 1982 de første svage meldinger kom. Allererst som en joke: der er en sygdom der kun rammer homoseksuelle – senere som et rygte, man vidste havde et gran af sandhed, men som ingen vidste hvad man skulle gøre ved. – AIDS dukkede så op på et tidspunkt, hvor vi var der, hvor vi havde vundet, i gåsøjne. Nu skulle det til at være sjovt. Vi havde fået fjernet mange af de undertrykkelsesmekanismer. Bøsser var blevet synlige i verden, og det var vores mål at synliggøre det. Nu skulle vi nyde frugterne af alt det arbejde, vi havde lavet. Og så får man den der ækle sygdom, smidt i sylten. Det var noget med overskrifter i Ekstra Bladet, "bøssekræft" og den slags."
- 6 Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2010, p. 9.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid., p. 11.
- 9 David Román, *Performance in America: Contemporary U.S. Culture and the Performing Arts*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2005, p. 1
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 For a theory on the centrality of negative emotions, see Heather Love, *Feeling Backwards: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2009.
- 14 Ibid., p. 2.
- 15 It is characteristic for the group's anarchistic organization that there is no clear history of its founding. The first of the versions above is from Bøggild. The second version is given in the national organization's magazine *Pan International*, spring 1980, p. 4. A general history of Forbundet af 1948 remains to be written, but the early organization predates the founding of the Mattachine Society in the USA in 1950 and is, as such, one of the world's earliest homosexual organizations. In his book *Mellem Mænd*, Danish sociologist Henning Bech describes some of the differences between BBF and Forbundet af 1948. See Henning Bech, *Mellem Mænd*, Gyldendal, Copenhagen 1988, pp. 109ff.
- 16 In keeping with this article's general policy, Danish names will be used. Some of the names are self-explanatory, but Britta Barfoed would be Britta Barefoot, Her-

tha Hæmning could be Hertha the Inhibited, and the last name of Lis Ladeport in literal translation means a barn gate which is a derogatory term in Danish for a large butt.

17 Bøggild, op.cit.

18 Ibid.

19 *Pan*, no. 1991, p.9. It is beyond the scope of this article to account for the history of homosexual marriage in Denmark. Some key dates, however, are: in 1981 is homosexuality no longer classified as a disease; likewise in 1981, Forbundet af 1948, the leading gay organization in Denmark, develops its first white paper on homosexual marriage; in 1984, a majority in parliament votes to create a commission to analyze the living conditions of homosexuals in Denmark; AIDS draws attention in the main-stream media starting in the mid-1980s combining civil rights and AIDS discourses; in 1986, laws pertaining to inheritance are changed; in 1987, an anti-discrimination bill makes it through Parliament; and in 1989, Parliament approves the so-called 'registered partnership'. All this to point out that homosexuality, AIDS, and citizenship is at the forefront of public discourse throughout the 1980s.

20 David Bell and Jon Binnie, *The Sexual Citizen: Queer Politics and Beyond*, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK, 2000, p. 10.

21 Ibid., p. 4.

22 Bøggild, op.cit. p.162. Original quote: "Det var skidegodt – men tænk hvis der havde sidet nogen med AIDS og set det."

23 When translated literally Buddha og Bagbordsindianerne means Buddha and the Portside Indians, which, of course, makes very little sense in any language. In Danish, though, 'bagbordsindianer' is an outdated, derogatory reference to men engaging in anal intercourse.

24 Bøggild, op.cit., 161. Original quote: "Jeg havde tænkt det skulle hedde noget rigtig grimt, prutridderne, bæskubberne, sådan et eller andet grimt. Bøsse er blevet sådan et pænt ord, man kan sige i Folketinget, og det var jo i virkeligheden ikke meningen med det. Det var meningen, at det skulle rumme en vis farlighed. Så sagde jeg til Britta, det hedder Buddha.....Buddha og Bagbordsindianerne."

25 *The Normal Heart* played at Rialto Teatret in Copenhagen and *As Is* at Aarhus Teater in the second largest Danish city, Aarhus. Together the performances constitute the first representations of gay men and AIDS in the

established theatre.

26 Bøggild, op. cit., p. 162. The original quote is: "vi vil lave noget om AIDS og religion og verdens undergang."

27 *Det Scener Endianer* in Bent Jacobsen's private collection. A literal English Translation would be: "But from the United States / comes suddenly this AIDS / It is like this new plague / could have been ordered by Dr Best / to combat all bad habits // But we don't say that // Because when we question the normal ones, we are / committed as crazy. / Even when their thoughts are banal / their actions hurt / and it gets worse year for year // now, the pimps of capitalism roll out their last weapons / and let them speak. We are all entering celibacy / both sexually and socially. I take care of me and you of you / That's what gives the most profit for the time being."

28 Ibid. A literal English translation would be: "This is how I found the way home to God / Now I adhere to his smallest command / Imagine if I had become a radical / It's safer to be normal."

29 Jan Maagaard, a widely respected stage director, directed the two main charity shows in Denmark; first at Det Ny Teater and later at Cirkusbygningen. Danish actor Søren Pilmark hosted the affairs. According to an interview with Jan Maagaard, it was important to have a famous, respected heterosexual man host the events in order to gain the awareness of the mainstream population.

30 Helle og Lykke is a phonetic play on the Danish expression "held og lykke" ('good luck'), literally 'luck and happiness'.

31 From the material in Bent Jacobsen's collection. The original quotes are: "dybeste sorg, urtungt ursind, skæbnesvangre aften, tragiske tider, bedrøvede, nedslåede, grædefærdige, deprimerede" etc.

32 "The Healthy Gays' Society," an obvious play on the established organization's name and "Minister of Disease, Ilse Ildebrand," a reference to the Minister of Health.

33 All quotes from the script in Bent Jacobsen's collection. Rasmus Rask is a play on the Danish word for 'healthy' ('rask'). In other words, Rasmus Rask is Rasmus Healthy.

34 Ibid. Original quote: "Er du mellem 15 og 30, slank og solbrændt, ikke for feminin, i økonomisk og psykisk balance. Holder du af rejser, kunst, go' mad og hjemlig hygge. Lå'r du dig jævnlige teste selvom du lever i cølibat, for man ved jo aldrig.... Har du noget mellem ørerne og noget mellem benene og er parat til vise det i trygge omgivelser."

35 *Intet nyt fra Pestfronten*; Digt til en støttefest. A liter-

al English translation would be: "They are often pigs / mating with thousands / and they don't care if they aren't Danish / but Islamic / but even though their outrageous behaviour slowly kills them / we are still to pity them, they cannot help it / so we must all do ours, they should not be beaten / we'll save up for a deserted island / there they can look at nature and listen to the dogs bark / until they die."

- 36 Ibid. A literal English translation would be: "we must be tough on AIDS and HTLV3 and HIV / and fight so that all in our old Denmark / again will be negative."